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ABSTRACT

Increasing concerns have been expressed about the differences between the achievements of boys and girls, especially in terms of literacy. This account of an action research project by a teacher-librarian explores the reading habits of a sample of boys and girls in S1 and S2 in a Scottish secondary school, and describes how the findings led to the establishment of an out-of-school support scheme, funded by the New Opportunities Fund, that encouraged boys to read more. Both boys (n=39 S1 boys) and girls (n=39 S1 girls) were asked to complete questionnaires about their habits and reading. The results were encouraging and are summarized. Results of questionnaires administered to S2 boys were similar. (NKA)

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by Julie Simmons

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SCRE Spotlights
From The Scottish Council for Research in Education
81

Raising the Standard of Boys' Achievement in Literacy

Julie Simmons

Increasing concerns have been expressed about the differences between the achievements of boys and girls, especially in terms of literacy. This account of an action research project by Julie Simmons, a teacher-librarian in a Scottish secondary school, explores the reading habits of a sample of boys and girls in S1 and S2, and describes how the findings led to the establishment of an out-of-school support scheme, funded by the New Opportunities Fund. The research project was supported by a SEED/SCRE Practitioner Research Small Grant.

Recent media reports have highlighted a widening gap between the achievement of boys and girls in all areas of the curriculum, but especially in terms of their basic literacy skills. This is of increasing concern to policy makers, teachers and researchers and was the starting point for the research reported below. I believe that literacy is fundamental to pupils' success both in school, and as part of the process of encouraging lifelong learning. As a teacher-librarian with twenty years experience, I have always tried to encourage children, both boys and girls, to read widely but also wondered if I could achieve more by undertaking a research project which would:

- Identify what attracted or discouraged boys to read
- develop strategies to encourage them to read more; and
- analyse the success of the work.

▶ *WHAT DO BOYS THINK?*

My preparation began with background reading of books dealing with this issue, as well as collecting and filing any articles that appeared in newspapers and magazines. I also used the Internet. It soon became apparent that the issue is not exclusive to Britain: other countries report similar concerns.

I began by selecting a target group of S1 boys (this was later extended to include S2 boys as well). My rationale was that I wanted to encourage and support the development of positive attitudes as soon as pupils entered the secondary school and establish regular reading habits, which could be sustained as they progressed through the school. By working with pupils studying Higher English I had noticed that generally speaking boys appeared to have more difficulty selecting texts for personal study than girls did because they were not in the habit of reading fiction texts regularly.

In my current post, I have a lot of contact with S1 and S2 pupils, both through working with them through the various departments in the school and through out-of-hours activities in the Learning Resource Centre (LRC). This proved to be very advantageous when it came to identifying what they think about reading.

Information for this research was collected from a number of sources: from pupil questionnaires, discussion with, and observation of pupils, feedback from other teachers and finally, an analysis of school library borrowing statistics. I will consider each in turn below.

Questionnaire evidence

I began by preparing questionnaires which both boys and girls in S1 were asked to complete. I asked them not to put their names on the sheets (which were colour coded) as I hoped that anonymity would help them to be more honest in their responses. I stressed that I wanted them to write what they felt, not what they thought I might want to hear. Thirty-nine S1 boys and thirty-nine S1 girls completed the questionnaires.

The purpose of the questionnaires was to help establish:

- What interested boys and how they spent their leisure time
- which subjects they preferred
- which reading formats they preferred
- what were the preferred genres, ie books, magazines, newspapers
- whether their peers influenced their choices
- whether they had role models at home who read; and
- what their attitude was towards reading.

It is clear from the responses to the questionnaire, that boys in the S1 sample have definite views and preferences. The following findings emerged from the survey:

- Not surprisingly a large proportion of boys in the sample gave sporting activities as their main form of recreation, with football being the most popular. But

ten boys, six of whom were in the top English section, gave reading as a leisure time activity. Other interests included playing musical instruments, playing computer games and watching television.

- Subject preferences ranged across the curriculum with no one subject clearly favoured over others by the majority of boys.
- Interestingly both boys and girls pointed to books and magazines, as their most favoured reading formats. However, those with reading difficulties tended to favour computer formats. This is possibly because multimedia, such as CD-ROMs, usually contain video clips, illustrations and narration, which would help them to understand a subject more easily than when they were presented with continuous prose.
- Boys identified adventure and sport as their two favourite subjects to read about. A list of the books recently read by boys and girls in the sample is shown below. This probably reflects their interest and participation in physical activities, which was evident from their responses to other questions on the questionnaire.
- The influence of peers was evident, and friends' preferences mirrored their own choices.
- Encouragingly all boys stated that members of their family, both female and male, read. Newspapers were the most read format by older males, and non-fiction was preferred to fiction. When asked who read the most, boys reported that females and males read about the same but girls believed that either females read more or both females and males read about the same. One boy reported that:

  My sister reads more because she goes to college.

- Every pupil recognised the importance of reading. They linked reading to success in school, particularly in English, and getting a job in later life. They also recognised reading as an integral part of learning. The concern was expressed that if you couldn't read you would be regarded as stupid. This was especially noticeable with the group that had learning difficulties and is, I believe, a fear that could easily affect self-esteem. Some boys typical of others noted that:

  When you're working you might not know what you're doing [if you can't read] *and you would probably be embarrassed*

  Your life depends on reading because in every job you have to be able to read.

  If you cannot read you might not get a good job.

  [If you read] *you know what's happening around the world and you might need to read in your job when you're older.*

- The improvement of vocabulary and spelling through reading was also mentioned quite often and pleasingly, some respondents also remarked on its enjoyment factor. Three boys pointed out that:

  If you read more you can write stories of your own and know how to use language.

  When you read you learn about situations and you are able to learn to grasp new words.

  It [reading] *helps your vocabulary.*

And another thought that:

Its [reading] *is important and it's fun but also it's very interesting and books are easy to take on holiday.*

Results from a slightly different questionnaire conducted with S2 boys showed very similar results.

Discussion and Observation

Throughout the research project I regularly had discussions with boys, both individually and in groups, within classes and informally. I also used observation, again, when I saw them in class groups, and during out of hours activities. In addition, I asked a learning support teacher who was with one class for her impressions. These observations and discussions were very important as they allowed me continuously to assess the impact of the strategies I implemented and make any alterations to increase their chance of success.

Statistics

Through the Learning Resource Centre's automated management system, *Book Mark*, I was able to keep a record of borrowing statistics and each pupil's borrowing history. This added an extra dimension to data collected from other sources and collectively the research helped me devise an intervention programme to encourage boys to read more.

▶ *CHANGING PRACTICE*

Reading Incentive Programme

A reading incentive scheme had already been established in the school but as a result of the questionnaires and discussions this was modified to be more attractive to boys. Participation is entirely voluntary and encourages pupils to read a wide variety of books. There were originally three levels, bronze, silver and gold, each requiring the pupil to read an increasing number of books. The scheme has proved so popular that extra levels have been introduced for pupils who wanted to carry on after they had finished their gold award.

On completion of each level, pupils receive a certificate at a special assembly. Pupils from each year are represented on the Learning Resource Centre committee and help disseminate information, select resources, and organise events. One suggested that we approach the local first division football team, Ross County, and asked if it would support our scheme. As a result the coach, Neale Cooper, has presented certificates on the last two occasions. Given boys' interest in sports, especially football, as reported in the questionnaires, this association has definitely increased the kudos of those receiving reading awards. The event is reported in the local press and each recipient has their photograph taken with Neale. One copy is given to the pupil and the other prominently displayed on a noticeboard dedicated to award winners.

Prior to undertaking this research, project pupils were asked to read only fiction, but it was very obvious

I have also introduced a pilot paired computing scheme in which senior pupils help younger ones use multimedia resources. The aim of this is two-fold: to help the younger pupils develop confidence and skills in ICT; and to help them understand and interpret the information they are reading, thus helping to develop literacy skills as well.

A second induction evening for the parents of the new S1 pupils will again take place this year. The information packs have been modified to be more gender-specific and will also include lists of titles recommended by S1 pupils, and suggestions of books for adult readers. A summary of these parent events has been included in a new *Success Stories* leaflet published by the Highland Council Education Service.

At a school level, the process of evaluation and implementation will continue so that the actions we take as teachers will encourage both boys and girls to read more, not just in school but hopefully for life.

▶ *RESOURCES*

Hannan, J. (1999) *Improving Boys' Performance*. Dunstable: Folens.

Pickering, J. (1997) *Raising Boys' Achievement*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.

MacDonald, A., *et al* (1999) *Boys' Achievement, Progress, Motivation and Participation: Issues Raised by the Recent Literature*. Slough: NFER.

Anon (1999) *Oh Dear – It's a Boy*. The Observer Magazine 20 June.

Web resources

The Literacy Trust website (http://www.literarytrust.org.uk) has details of a wide range of literacy initiatives, including other research findings, and links to related sites.

Notes

1. SCRE is administering, on behalf of the Scottish Executive Education Department, the award of grants to support practitioners in schools and FE colleges in Scotland in undertaking small-scale research projects. The grants (of £250) are intended to assist with the costs of materials and practitioner release. Further details are on the SCRE website at: http://www.scre.ac.uk/tpr/ or tel. 0131 557 2944.

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from boys' responses that many preferred to read non-fiction. To recognise the validity of their choice, the programme was modified to allow them to read a mixture of fiction and non-fiction. Audio books were also included for pupils with learning difficulties. As a result of these changes sixty-one of the eighty-one pupils in S1 joined the scheme and at an award ceremony on World Book Day, for the first time, equal numbers of boys and girls received certificates.

Extending boys' choices

In the questionnaire boys highlighted magazines as one of their preferred reading formats. The selection held in the Resource Centre had been quite limited but because of the interest expressed the range was greatly increased. The pupils – both boys and girls – were consulted as to which titles they would like to see as part of the collection and the school purchased subscriptions for them. These have proved a successful addition and are read a lot during out-of-hours use of the Resource Centre.

Graphic novels were also purchased, and the range of titles, reflecting their interests in biographies of sporting personalities, was extended.

The pupils are encouraged to make suggestions as to any new resources they would like to see in the LRC. They know that these will be taken seriously and, if possible, acted upon. This has given pupils a feeling of ownership of the Resource Centre and as a consequence they display a very positive attitude towards it.

Gender Groups

After discussions with the staff of the English department it was decided that two of the classes would come to the LRC in single-sex groups for one lesson a week once a fortnight. This enabled me to have discussions with the groups about what they were reading, tailor materials to their different interests, develop information-handling skills and continue our programme of research work.

This proved so successful that this year all S1 and S2 classes will be adopting this pattern of using the LRC for English. Behaviour has also improved in the single sex groups and high quality work is being produced in a very positive learning atmosphere.

Parents' evening

From the questionnaire, it is clear that parents are an important influence on the reading habits of their children, especially so for boys. I, therefore, decided to hold an evening event for parents of the new S1 pupils.

The aims of the evening were to enhance the welcome into our school community and inform them about the role of the Learning Resource Centre and the research project. Two local authors spoke about the importance of reading and read from their own works.

Each parent received an information pack that included hints on encouraging their child's reading and lists of recommended titles. A stall sold books at reasonable prices and pupils from the LRC committee were on hand to demonstrate multimedia resources and guide parents. The response was very positive with most of the parents attending and those that couldn't come requesting information packs. This now features as a regular event on the school calendar.

What have you read recently?

Books read by S2 boys

- *Skellig* by David Almond
- *Oxford Book of Nasty Endings*
- *Star Wars: Phantom Menace* by Terry Brooks
- *Subtle Knife* by Philip Pullman
- *Goosebumps* (Horror series)
- *Angry Aztecs* (Horrible History series)
- *Boy Next Door* by Sinclair Smith
- *Matilda* by Roald Dahl
- *Addicted* by Tony Adams (Autobiography, football)
- *Rangers Story* (Football)
- *The Queen's Nose* by Dick King-Smith

Books read by S2 girls

- *The Boy Next Door* by Sinclair Smith
- *Cuckoo in the Nest* by Michelle Magorian
- *Truth, Lies and Homework* by Josephine Feeney
- *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maude Montgomery
- *The Diary of Anne Frank*
- *Goodnight Mr Tom* by Michelle Magorian
- *Flowers in the Attic* by Virginia Andrews
- *Calvin & Hobbs* (Humour)
- *Midnight Hour* by Karen Robards
- *Special Delivery* by Danielle Steel
- *Charlie* by Leslie Pearse

▶ *WHAT NEXT?*

The research project and subsequent developments were undertaken to encourage boys to read more; I believe they have had a positive impact. Boys' borrowing habits have changed and most demonstrate a positive attitude towards reading. These results have been confirmed through statistics, discussions and observations, but where do we go from here?

I intend to continue, and extend, the work I have started in this area. To this end I have developed a plan for a three-year Out-of-Hours Literacy Programme and have successfully applied for funding from the New Opportunities Fund. This will include the establishment of 'Dads and Lads' and 'Mums and Daughters' reading groups, and after school, evening, and weekend activities to develop a range of skills. I have also participated in in-service training events for other teachers to encourage them to explore ways in which they may actively support boys' reading habits.